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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Statement submitted by Franciscans International, International Alliance of Women, International Council of Women, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, and Society for International Development, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; All India Women's Conference, Arab Lawyers Union, Association of Arab-American University Graduates, Baha'í International Community, Disabled People's International, International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centres, International Federation of University Women, International Federation of Women in Legal Careers, International Federation of Women Lawyers St. Joan's International Alliance, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, and World Information Transfer, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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We, the above-named international and national non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and members of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women (New York), are working together to support the implementation of the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women and the work of the Commission on the Status of Women. We recognize that the critical areas of concern in the Platform of Action are interwoven and cannot be separated if we are to achieve an environment in which women can pursue their lives in peace and harmony.

While we recognize that each organization has its specific mission and will work on the issues raised at the Conference in its own way, we are committed to working together to share information, and we will work in coalition to achieve specific outcomes in the four critical areas of concern identified by the Commission at its forty-second session.

We acknowledge the need to address these issues from a variety of perspectives, looking at them over the entire lifespan – girl child, adult, older woman. The goals of our work, in collaboration with the member States, are to enhance opportunities for girls and women, to allow them to reach their full potential, and to provide them with supportive and protective environments throughout their lives.

The NGO Consultation, which met 1 March 1998, brought together representatives of non-governmental organizations from all over the world to discuss key concerns in these areas and served to deepen our commitment to our work together. Task forces of our Committee have explored and studied these areas during the past year.

Human rights

Women's rights are human rights. Human rights are indivisible. All rights are linked – political, social, cultural, economic and religious. They are not to be positioned against each other but must be addressed together. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women aims to ensure non-discrimination for women and recognizes that women are more likely to experience discriminatory practices than are their male counterparts. This discrimination begins with the girl child. We recognize the Convention on the Rights of the Child, used in combination with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as the strongest way to address discrimination in whatever form.

We support the effort of member States to establish and enforce laws in compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and advocate that the members of the Convention advance the work of that Convention through adoption of the optional protocol. Although 171 Member States of the United Nations have ratified the Convention, universal ratification without reservation is needed to strengthen the status of women worldwide. Through our member organizations, we will strongly urge the remaining Member States to ratify by the year 2000.

The girl child

The Fourth World Conference on Women marked a turning point for girls in that, for the first time, its Platform for Action included a public and global acknowledgment of widespread discrimination against girls at all stages and in all areas of their lives. Chapter

IV, section L, of the Platform solders the link between women and girls and reinforces the clear understanding that progress for one cannot take place without progress for the other.

Girls are born with the inherent and inalienable rights of all human beings. In addition, they have the right to a healthy childhood, to develop to their full potential, and to be protected from abuse and exploitation. Governments who have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child have obligated themselves to ensure and respect those rights, without discrimination, equally for children of all ages. We urge the Member States to implement the Convention through passage of legislation, commitment of resources, implementation of programmes and policies, and, most importantly, through the force and persistence of political will to give credibility to governmental commitments.

Violence against women

Violence against women is any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in private or public life. It violates and impairs women's enjoyment of their human rights. Violence against women includes structural violence with high social, economic, environmental and mental and physical health costs to the individual and society.

To reduce and eliminate violence against women, we urge Member States to move forward on education, legislation, prevention and services aimed at changing attitudes and fostering community responsibility.

Women in armed conflict

The most vulnerable and victimized women and girls are those who have been affected by armed conflict. This group is increasing in number. The conflicts of today are internal, civil and ethnic, rather than international, and they produce millions of civilian casualties. Women and girls are among the war disabled. They become widows and orphans, and the children and wives of the disabled; refugees and internally displaced; internees of forced labour and concentration camps; the victims of mines. They may be raped and sexually exploited. Their human rights are violated – especially those of young girls who are the most vulnerable.

The impacts of war are not limited to immediate dislocations and trauma; they are long-lasting, calling for social, medical and economic interventions to enable women and girls to resume their rightful places in the family, community and society. We urge justice for those already devastated, through prosecution, in the emerging international criminal court, of those who have committed crimes against women. To limit harm to women during war, we urge full protection through the observance of human rights protocols which must be observed by all parties to the conflict and monitored by international agencies and tribunals. We also urge the prevention of armed conflicts through development of a "culture of peace", bringing more women into conflict resolution and diplomacy initiatives and moving them into national and leadership positions.

Other areas of concern

Our member organizations have identified the concerns of older women as an urgent issue. With 1999 proclaimed by the United Nations as the International Year of Older Persons, we need to intensify our efforts in this area.

Since our member organizations are firmly committed to the United Nations work for the advancement of women, we urge Member States to implement the Beijing Platform for Action through a full commitment to financial and institutional requirements within the United Nations system. We also urge Member States to make similar commitments at the national level.